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AUTHOR Kirkhart, Karen E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

It is argued that the role of the evaluator is fluid and subject to unpredictable change over time. Two key principles from systems theory support the above: (1) the definition of an organization as an open system, and (2) the self-regulatory or cybernetic nature of systems. Actual experiences are drawn upon to describe that interrupted the evaluation process or changed the nature of the evaluation. The "By the way..." phenomenon referred to is described as an interaction between the organization and the evaluator that results in a modification, revision, deletion or addition to the previously prescribed evaluator role and its attendant activities. The basic premise, that changes themselves are not able to be anticipated, is explored: and it is concluded that the task becomes one of skill development (Specifically, renegotiation) so that the processes are there to handle the role changes as they occur. (Author/GK)

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THE "BY THE WAY..." PHENOMENON: ROLE REDEFINITION IN PROGRAM EVALUATION

by

Karen E. Kirkhart, Paul A. Miller,

Laurie A. Friedman and Thomas P. Washington

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PROLOGUE

The meeting had gone well. The new evaluator had presented a draft of the pretest-posttest control-group design to the staff, and the program coordinator had been well pleased. The evaluator was ready to begin implementation of the design. To conclude the meeting, the evaluator asked if there were any points that needed further discussion. There was only one.

The coordinator turned to the evaluator and casually said, "Oh, by the way....It wasn't in the schedule, but we've already started the intervention. Do you think it will affect the evaluation?"

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the product of the shared experiences of faculty and students in the Practicum in Program Evaluation of the Department of Educational Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin. Students in that course undertake evaluation responsibilities at human service agencies in the community and apply such skills as negotiating an evaluation agreement, selecting an appropriate design, collecting and analyzing data, and working with managers to facilitate use of the findings. In this context we noted repeated events that interrupted the evaluation process or substantially changed the nature of the evaluation itself. At first these

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were viewed as idiosyncratic instances, and we approached them from a trouble-shooting perspective with the goal of solving the immediate problems. Over the course of the semester, however, the frequency of their occurrence led us to treat these events as "facts of life" for the evaluator and we moved into the second semester by systematically documenting these events that occurred "By the way..." and structuring hypotheses so that our experiences could offer confirming or disconfirming evidence. These experiences, plus relevant theory from the literature that helps to understand the phenomenon, form the basis of this paper.

BASIC DEFINITIONS

The "By the way..." phenomenon refers to an interaction between the organization and the evaluator that results in a modification, revision, deletion or addition to the previously prescribed evaluator role and its attendant activities. The "By the way..." event is typically unanticipated and unexpected by the evaluator (and perhaps by the administrator or manager as well). It is equally likely to occur when the evaluation is internal or external to the organization and it may be perceived by the evaluator as a positive or negative experience. "By the way...s" have been observed at all stages of the evaluation process: (1) initiation and contract negotiation, (2) conceptualization of formal design (3) design implementation/data collection, (4) data transformation, analysis, and interpretation, and (5) reporting, dissemination and utilization of findings.

While "By the way..." events themselves vary widely in content, they have a common outcome: a redefinition of the <u>role</u> that the evaluator

is expected to perform in the organization. To understand the "By the way...) phenomenon better, it is first useful to examine past attempts to define the role of program evaluators.

EVALUATOR ROLES

A review of recent evaluation literature yields three distinct conceptual approaches to the definition of the evaluator role: (1) definition by integration with management decision-making, (2) distinguishing generalist roles from specific evaluator roles, and (3) definition by level of program development (Kirkhart, 1980).

First, the definition of evaluator role by integration with management decision-making is best illustrated by the work of Attkisson and colleagues in community mental health evaluation (Attkisson et al., 1978). A four-stage model is proposed, representing evolving levels of evaluator involvement with management. The least integration with management occurs at level one, Statistical/Clerical, where the evaluator functions as a statistical clerk. At the second level Clinical/Experimental, the evaluator has higher technical competence but conducts only isolated experiments in the clinical setting. At the third level, Technical/Evaluative, the evaluator collects data requested by managers, and at the fourth and highest level of integration with management the evaluator him/herself is part of the decision-making process that determines what information is to be collected. While this model defines a variety of evaluator roles as legitimate, the roles representing greater integration of evaluation with decision-making are implicitly seen as more desirable. Also noteworthy

for our purposes is the fact that the evolution of evaluator roles is hypothesized to follow an orderly progression upward across levels over time, but at any given point in time the evaluator may be identified with a fixed role.

The second approach to defining evaluator roles addresses the question of whether such roles are generic or specific (McCullough, 1975; Tornatzky, 1979). McCullough (1975) argues in favor of the "general practitioner evaluator," i.e., one who has the skills to accommodate a number of roles with ease. Like Attkisson, McCullough points to a need to train several levels of evaluators to address the differing needs of organizations, but he implies no evolution of roles within an organization. Tornatzky (1979) also omits a time dimension from his discussion of evaluator roles, proposing that evaluators simultaneously function as researchers, innovators, and politician/administrators. Moreover, Tornatzky discourages the fragmentation of evaluator roles, arguing that the general role of evaluator cannot be meaningfully separated from the more specific roles.

Third, the evaluator role has been defined in terms of program development (Tripodi, Fellin, & Epstein, 1971, 1978; Johnson, 1970). These models propose that the role of an evaluator within a program is determined by that program's developmental stage. Thus within a given developmental stage, such as initiation, contact, implementation (Tripodi, Fellin, & Epstein, 1971, 1978) or formulation, implementation, and post-project (Johnson, 1970) the evaluator role remains fixed; however the

evaluator's role would be expected to change in a predictable manner as the program itself evolves.

In all cases, the frameworks proposed to date for addressing evaluator roles assume that the role of an evaluator is either fixed at any given point in time or that it will vary predictably according to certain criteria which can be identified in advance. This, in turn, is based on an even larger assumption: the organization of which the evaluator is a member will remain fixed or will vary predictably over time. It is our contention that neither of these assumption is borne out in actual practice and that present models are inadequate to explain the functional role of evaluators.

We would argue that evaluator roles are, in fact, fluid and not fixed. The static models of evaluator roles have forced clarity out of complexity, presenting a theoretical "neatness" that does not exist in practice. Moreover, we contend that it is impossible to anticipate all eventualities such that a clearcut initial role definition is possible. Rather, the definition of the evaluator's role is an interactive process, and redefinition and adjustment of his/her role are continuously occurring in response to unforseen events; hence, the "By the way..." phenomenon. These events are not seen as idiosyncratic aberrations in the organization but as normal occurrences in the operation of open systems. To understand the "By the way..." phenomenon and the role of the program evaluator then, one must turn to systems theory.

EVALUATION IN OPEN SYSTEMS

The model of an organization as a system provides a theoretical base which supports our assumption of change and fluidity within organizations as a whole and within evaluation as a specific subsystem. Two key principles emerge from systems theory that support our argument that the role of evaluator is fluid and may change unpredictably over time. They are: (1) the definition of an organization as an open system, and (2) the self-regulatory or cybernetic nature of systems.

The first principle defines the organization as an open system. Since human service delivery systems (the evaluation setting of concern here) maintain an ongoing exchange with their environments--taking in, processing, and sending out resources, information and materials--they are considered open systems. More specifically, open systems are defined by three assumptions (Baker, 1969). First, organizations are defined by their primary task; that is, the task which the organization was created to perform. In human sercice systems, the definition of primary task is frequently complicated by the existence of multiple goals, some of which cannot be accomplished without interaction with other systems. Second, as an open system, an organization accomplishes its primary task by admitting inputs from the environment, using its subsystems to convert them, and sending outputs back into the environment. Third, organizations encounter boundary conditions which rapidly change the characteristics of the organization. Boundary conditions refer to the various dimensions of the interorganizational environment which provide inputs to or

accept outputs from a given organization and which affect the organization's structure and functioning (Baker, 1969). The concept of the organization as one system interacting with other systems is an important point. It implies, for example, that the ability of Organization A to anticipate fluctuations in its operation can be determined only to the extent that the operations of the other organizations in its environment can be accurately predicted. However, Organization A has a limited capacity to predict the operations of the other organizations in its environment. Thus, it cannot predict when or exactly how it will have to respond or adjust its functioning to adapt to inputs from these other systems. A systems view of this adaptation process takes us to the second principle: the cybernetic nature of systems.

All system parts are connected by processes devoted to maintaining the integrity (growth, stability, survival) of the organization during periods of normal functioning as well as times of change. These mechanisms are homeostatic and self-regulatory in their actions. That is, they act to signal the system when its functioning exceeds or is about to exceed the limits of its normal range of operation, and they also act to return the system to within this normal range. These mechanisms adjust and redefine the functions of the subsystems to maintain system integrity.

As we noted previously, the organization cannot always predict the timing or nature of its environmental inputs and therefore, cannot predict with certainty the course of its own functioning over time. The organization's chief means of adaptation to this uncertainty is to change

the function(s) of one or more of its subsystems. The changes in function modify, in whole or in part, the subsystem delegated to handle the input. The modification in function is represented at the level of the individual as a change in one's role within the organization.

In summary, because the organization is dependent on other systems in its environment, it can neither remain static nor can it perfectly predict changes in state. Inasmuch as the subsystems operate according to the same principles as the larger system, they also neither remain fixed nor vary predictably over time. These unpredictable subsystem changes are passed on to the level of the individual as role redefinition.

While the specific events which impinge on and necessitate redefinition of the evaluator role cannot always be anticipated based on the information available to the evaluator, systems theory does provide a perspective for identifying critical setting variables for the occurrence of "By the way..." events. We propose that the following eight dimensions affect the extent (frequency and degree) of role redefinition:

1. Organizational congruence. The degree to which the organization has effectively and efficiently integrated the structure and functioning of its various components.

2. Task clarity. Degree of clarity of the evaluation task itself.

3. Administrative competence and functioning. The extent to which authority and responsibility are clearly delegated, feedback loops established, clear messages given, and organizational goals are consistently communicated.

4. Procedures for adaptation. The existence and adequacy of procedures that an organization can call into action when faced with an unexpected input.

5. Evaluator characteristics. The expertise of the evaluator plus his/her diplomacy and personality.

6. Organizational commitment to the evaluation task/goals. The extent to which evaluation is an integral part of the organization, well integrated into its structure and functioning.

7. Internal input into the organization. How well the informal and formal structure of the organization fulfills mutual and individual goals.

8. External input into the organization. Changes in the larger environment which act to change the nature or functioning of the organization.

To return to our opening vignette, the following case study illustrates the interaction of these factors in setting the stage for a "By the way...". (No doubt the reader may know of situations of equal or greater difficulty or perhaps ones that led to positive redefinitions of role.)

> The local public school system had decided to establish a one-year nutrition education program. The program was initiated and planned by the local Parent-Teacher Association and school officials before the evaluator was hired. During the contract negotiations, the evaluator and school officials defined the evaluator's responsibilities which included designing pre- and post-tests to be used, collecting baseline data, and collecting ongoing evaluation data on the effects of the curriculum on students' eating habits at lunch. The contract was agreed on and the evaluator reported to work soon thereafter.
>
> His early days on the job were replete with "By the way...s". Due to poor lines of communication among the nutrition program staff, the school administration and the school faculty, the program was already being piloted in one of the schools in the district. A full five months of nutrition instruction had been given to the target classes without the nutrition program director's knowledge. The first "By the way..." request for the evaluator was to create a design that could take into account the previous "accidental" nutrition instruction.
>
> The second big surprise soon came when the evaluator discovered that the nutrition project director had already allowed the experimental lunchroom programs to start, thus precluding the gathering of "clean" baseline information on students' nutritional habits at lunch.

> A third "By the way..." came into the picture from outside the system in the form of court-ordered desegregation. Considerable ambiguity existed at that time in the nature of the desegregation plan, when it was to be implemented and which schools were to be affected. The stakes were high for all concerned, and the efforts of school personnel and administration were marshalled to deal with potential problems. Attention and commitment to the nutrition project began to wane. Further, since the schools were unclear as to how they were going to be affected by the desegregation plan, the nutrition project director had no way of knowing what effects it would have on the nutrition program. School district personnel could offer no guidance, as they were unsure as well. The evaluator then found himself asked not to set up and implement an evaluation design for a program, but to develop a series of design options contingent upon which desegregation plan was adopted.

A number of explicit "By the way..." examples emerge from this case study that serve to illustrate how the dimensions listed previously affect role redefinition. First, the teaching of the accidental nutrition lesson suggests a breakdown in the communication lines (congruence) of the organization--a situation not uncovered until the evaluator had passed through the contract negotiation phase and gotten to hands-on work with the project. Regardless of the contract terms, the problem was his to deal with. Next, one might question the competence of the director of the nutrition program with respect to program evaluation for allowing the experimental lunchroom programs to begin before baseline data could be collected. This is especially pertinent since the responsibility for collecting such data was clearly outlined in the evaluator's contract.

Despite these internal problems, the major "By the way..." event involved external input into the system, i.e., the court ordered desegregation. There was no way the school personnel, let alone the director of a single project within a large urban school district, could have

anticipated this external input into the system. The school as a system had to respond to this input. Consequently, responsibilities of school personnel in other quarters (teachers, principals) shifted,and commitment to the program shifted along with it. The district's lack of clarity about the desegregation plan also prevented the adoption of an effective adaptive procedure to deal with the potential changes in the organization of the schools with respect to the nutrition program. The evaluator found himself a reluctant participant in this entire process. There was little he could do other than to use his expertise to facilitate the best possible evaluation given the circumstances at hand. In fact, the characteristics of the evaluator helped here. The evaluator was knowledgeable about the school system and evaluation techniques and was sympathetic to the nutrition program director's plight. Her response to the lack of direction from top levels of the organization was to draw as much from the evaluator's expertise as she could, indirectly giving him responsibility for tasks defined in her role as director of the program.

In summary, the factors involved in this case of role redefinition included (1) poor organizational congruence, (2) lack of administrator competence with respect to evaluation, (3) ineffective or nonexistent procedures for adaptation, (4) an unanticipated external input to the organization, (5) diminished commitment of personnel associated with the project, (6) evaluator characteristics, and (7) lack of task clarity once the unanticipated, external input occurred.

IMPLICATIONS

While careful future research might lead to predictive models around these and other variables, such quantification is at this time premature. Rather, we can talk in qualitative terms about a certain "coefficient of unexpectedness" which results from the presence or absence of the dimensions discussed above and their interaction. It is important to emphasize that role definition and redefinition is not simply a matter of insightful contract negotiation or start-up planning. Rather, there are numerous countervailing forces operating during the entire course of an evaluation that may potentially act to redefine the nature of the task. For better or for worse, these forces impinge upon the evaluator's performance and definition of his/her role in that evaluation process. However, cognizance of these elements and the realization that "By the way...s" can be expected to occur as a normal condition of the evaluation process will assist the evaluator in successfully responding in the most adaptive way to the redefinition of his/her evaluation activities.

Moreover, the evaluator need not enter the process unprepared. The "By the way..." phenomenon has clear implications for training program evaluators. If our basic premise is correct--that the changes themselves are <u>not</u> able to be anticipated, then the task becomes one of skill development so that the <u>processes</u> are there to handle the role changes as they occur. Thus, role renegotiation skills must be a part of the evaluator's armamentarium.

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